

Treatment model nears completion, Martz hears

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Much-needed information on the individual and overall cost of treating patients suffering from asbestos-related disease could be available by early fall, a committee working on the problem learned Friday during a visit with Gov. Judy Martz.

"We're close to finalizing information that (actuary) Jim Buck needs to create a model," said Rick Palagi, administrator and CEO of St. John's Lutheran Hospital. "It's very imperfect and probably won't cover everything."

Palagi said the group has struggled to gain more accurate information on how many Libby victims of asbestos-related disease will need assistance, when they will need assistance, what kind of assistance and how fast the disease progresses after being seemingly dormant in individuals.

"Hopefully in two to three months we



Governor Judy Martz visits with Pat Cohan of the Center for Asbestos Related Disease on Friday during her trip to Libby.

will have information back from Buck that will enable us to forecast," he said.

Martz secured a federal grant to help pull together the model needed to establish a health trust for the Libby victims of a past vermiculite mining and mill operation by W.R. Grace. The committee has been working on the actuary study for almost two years.

"We've come a long way from where we were," Martz said. "A lot of people have been working on this with repetition of efforts."

At the recent national governor's meeting, asbestos health issues were a concern shared by the entire group.

"The ramifications of how to deal with this is something Congress has to deal with fairly quickly," Martz said.

She praised the group for keeping focused on the end goal.

"I'm excited to see what you have in

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the hospital," the governor said. "This particular hospital has more things than you find in a rural hospital. Of course, you have it because of this problem. For rural Montana, this is outstanding."

Palagi said the community asked the governor for help and she responded. He said the study group's progress has been slow because the problem is complicated and not black and white.

"Well, you're inventing a lot of it," the governor said of the efforts to identify mortality and medical needs information.

"That's not to say we haven't been discouraged from time to time," said Rita Windom, Lincoln County Commissioner. "It's so tedious and so slow."

Martz said the group is facing the same task she and her admin-

istration faced developing a Homeland Security defense plan.

"We had to decide where to start, what to include and as it snowballed, with arms and legs hanging out of it. As it began rolling downhill it gained more and more momentum," Martz said. "Montana was the first state to turn in a plan and its being used as a model for other states to work from. I imagine that is what you are doing with this."

Palagi said the people working on the asbestos issue in the community today recognize the problem and the need, they also have a concern for it continuing into the future.

Windom and Palagi explained that continuing federal funding cutbacks were slowing the EPA cleanup in Libby with some projections putting the completion in 10-12 years and not the three

years requested by the governor and the community.

Martz said the EPA must be made to adhere to a cleanup plan with "operable units," sections of the cleanup area that can be completed and taken out of the Superfund designation.

Windom noted that the failure to follow such a plan was making it impossible for economic development efforts to secure Brownfield grants and other help.

Martz said she would talk to John Wardell, EPA state director in Helena.

Also, Martz said she would not be joining EPA director Mike Leavitt during his visit May 26.

"He wants to come up by himself and see and listen to what's going on," she said. "He wants to leave all the politicians out of it."

Also, Windom expressed concerns with the change in the governor's administration in January 2005. Martz is not seeking reelection.

"I don't think anyone running

for office is foolish enough to walk away from Libby and its problems or refuse to acknowledge they exist," Martz said. "We've got the history and the files. I think you're going to be okay, it just might take some education."